



“Omit needless words.”
— William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White*

Dear Faithful Reader,

Twenty-five years ago, I decided to quit smoking.

This was not a casual decision. I didn't just smoke; I *loved* smoking. I'd been a pack-a-day guy for, not years, but decades. Cigarettes helped me write, helped me focus, helped me think. Or so went the story I told myself.

This was in the early days of what would become the greatest friendship of my life. Ana told me one day about losing relatives who had smoked all their lives, dying of lung cancer, about the struggle to breathe in their last days, drowning in their own toxic fluids. “I just want you to know,” she said, “I can't stay and watch you go through that.”

She never pushed on me, bless her, never urged me to quit or even voiced the thought that I *ought* to quit. Not once. I came to it myself. I realized, with tremendous reluctance, that one of my favorite indulgences was killing me. And so, one mild July day in 1999 I pulled a chair out onto my front porch, faced the sunset, and, like a man facing the firing squad, enjoyed my final smoke.

It felt like saying goodbye to a close friend. Like I was losing an essential part of who I was. Yet that turns out not to have been true at all.

Shucking off that piece of myself left me *more* myself. It's now twenty-five years later, and I'm younger today than I was on the day I lit up that last American Spirit.

In 2020, when I shared my long-labored manuscript for *Steel Fear*, my first novel, with my literary agent, she read it and said, “It's good. Really good.” And then added, almost like an aside: “You know, you have to lose about 50,000 words.”

Say *what*?

My manuscript then weighed in at about 153,000 words. She was saying that 50,000 of those had to go? “That's, like, every third word!”

But she was right. Over the next few months I shaved, tweezered, and chopped out adjectives, redundant phrases, whole lines, let the air out of overblown descriptions,

tightened up lengthy dialogs, cut out whole scenes, deep-sixed entire chapters, excised beloved but extraneous characters — all pieces of the story I thought I could not possibly let go of.

And the story got only better and better. Sharper, clearer, cleaner. More focused. In losing all those words, it became more *itself*. It became the book *Publishers Weekly* called “one of the best novels of the year,” the book that got nominated for a Barry Award for “best first novel,” the book Lee Child called “an instant classic, maybe an instant legend.”

None of which would have happened if we’d published that first, unchopped manuscript.

In [my coaching program, Writing Mastery Mentorship](#), we have a thing we call Rewrite Lab: I take piece of writing by one of our members and walk everyone through a complete rewrite, live on Zoom. It never fails to elevate that piece of writing to a level of impact that was virtually invisible in the rough draft.

And what I mostly do in those sessions, as Strunk and White put it their classic guidebook to effective writing *The Elements of Style*, is to “omit needless words.”

Here is the full Strunk and White passage, the famous “rule 17” known to every serious student of writing:

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

My friend Harry Bingham, the magnificent Welsh crime novelist and educator, calls it “removing words without removing content.” It is consistently the most effective tactic in the rewriter’s toolbox.

It is also the skill set that elevated Marie Kondo to fame and bestsellerdom with her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Uncluttering is simply the craft of rewriting as applied to your home, office, or studio.

Omit needless things.

It is also the process that the wisest among us apply to their lives, to their patterns of thought and behavior, as they age.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, close friends and colleagues in the forging of a new republic, became bitter political enemies who feuded viciously for decades. Until, late in life, Adams wrote Jefferson a letter and the two reconciled, thus beginning one of the great correspondences of American history.

What happened here? What did these two men do to produce such a remarkable turnaround?

They omitted needless attitudes.

They uncluttered — and in the process became more themselves.

Needless opinions, needless beliefs. Needless habits of deed and of thought. Removing viewpoints, to paraphrase Harry Bingham, without removing that content which is truly ourselves.

A question: What needless habits of thought and deed might you omit on the way to becoming more yourself? (Let me know, if so moved — I can't wait to read your answer!)

Marie Kondo preaches the practice of sorting out which of your possessions “spark joy” and holding onto those while letting the rest go.

Adams and Jefferson sorted their thoughts and rediscovered what sparked joy.

My August wish for you: that you spend a little time every day sorting the things of your heart and mind, searching out old attitudes, opinions, grievances, or beliefs that no longer serve you — and then decide to let them go.



*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Although it was William Strunk the schoolmaster who first wrote the phrase “Omit needless words,” I thought I would use this month’s quote as a springboard to talk a bit about Strunk’s coauthor, E.B. White — the shy, sensitive young man who became one of America’s most influential and most beloved writers.

Born in 1899 into a relatively large, happy family in a New York City suburb, Elwyn Brooks White never cared for his given name. “My mother just hung it on me because she’d run out of names,” he later wrote. “I was her sixth child.”

Happily for him, fate soon took care of that pesky detail: at Cornell, where he earned his undergraduate degree and edited the university newspaper, he also earned the nickname “Andy,” which stuck with him for the rest of his life.

(Actually, every Cornell student with the last name “White” was called “Andy,” a tradition owing to the fact that Cornell was cofounded by a man named Andrew White.)

Fresh out of college, White spent a few years working as a cub reporter, journalist, and advertising copywriter, bouncing from New York to the Pacific northwest and then back to New York.

He also began sending out short stories and essays to various magazines. As he put it:

“I never submitted a manuscript with a covering letter or through an agent. I used to put my manuscript in the mail, along with a stamped envelope for the rejection. This was a matter of high principle with me: I believed in the doctrine of immaculate rejection.”

One day in mid-1925, returning home from a trip abroad, he found a waiting stack of mail. He took the bundle to a nearby restaurant, ordered dinner, and sat opening envelopes — when to his surprise out from one dropped two or three checks. He’d just sold his first few pieces to an upstart humor magazine called *The New Yorker*, which that had just launched that same year.

“I suppose they totaled a little under a hundred dollars, but it looked like a fortune to me ... I still remember the feeling that *this was it* — I was a pro at last. It was a good feeling and I enjoyed the meal.”

White soon fell in love with the magazine’s literary editor — and the magazine’s readers soon fell in love with White. He wrote for *The New Yorker* for the rest of his life, some sixty years’ worth of columns, notes, and essays, and married the editor, Katharine Angell, in a union that also lasted the rest of his life (though he would outlive his best friend and companion by several years).

Over those decades he produced a steady stream of satirical sketches, poems, essays, and editorials, writing for *The New Yorker* as well as for *Harper’s*, *The Atlantic*, and many other publications. His classic 1948 essay *Here Is New York*, republished a year later as a book, has endured for the better part of a century as the quintessential love letter to New York City.

He also earned a national reputation as a master of clear, elegant prose coupled with rapier wit and insight. As his long-time friend and *New Yorker* officemate James Thurber (yes, [that James Thurber](#)) declared, “No one can write a sentence like E.B. White.”

A string of awards followed: the National Institute of Arts and Letters’ Gold Medal for Essays and Criticism in 1960; the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963; the National Medal for Literature in 1971; and in 1973 the members of the Institute elected him to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a society of fifty members. In 1978 he was awarded a Pulitzer in 1978 for “his letters, essays, and the full body of his work.”

That “body of work” included the little book that exhorted its readers to “omit needless words.”

In 1959, the Macmillan Company approached White with a novel idea. One of his professors at Cornell, William Strunk, Jr., had written a little stylebook for his students back in 1918. Would White be interested in updating and expanding the old man's guidebook for republication?

He would indeed. White remembered the old professor, who had died more than a decade earlier, with fondness and reverence, and he was the perfect choice for the project. He edited, revised, and updated Strunk's work and added a fifth chapter of his own, "An Approach to Style," that by itself is one of the most useful and flat-out enjoyable guides to good writing ever written.

The little book, dubbed "Strunk and White" in writing classes around the globe and across the generations, has since sold over ten million copies.

Still, it is neither *The Elements of Style* nor White's legendary essays that have made him one of the century's best known and most beloved writers.

His greatest impact has come through a trio of books written for children.

In the 1930s, White began typing up short stories about a mouse who lived with his family in New York City, which White would have on hand to tell his nieces and nephews whenever they asked for a story; in 1945, at the encouragement of his wife and several other editors, he compiled his stories into a book.

Despite an initially lukewarm reception, *Stuart Little* soon found legions of fans and became a favorite children's classic.

It also opened up a magic portal, much like the wardrobe door of C.S. Lewis's imagining, through which we get an intimate glimpse of the man's shy, companionable soul.

Here: take a look at this description, from page 1 of *Stuart Little*:

The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way. He was only about two inches high; and he had a mouse's sharp nose, a mouse's tail, a mouse's whiskers, and the pleasant, shy manner of a mouse."

Now listen to this description of White himself, from *New Yorker* colleague Brendan Gill:

"Andy White is small and wiry, with an unexpectedly large nose, speckled eyes, ... [even as a sophisticated adult he is] uncannily boyish-seeming."

It's hard not to see a bit of self-portraiture in that slim, dapper little two-inch character with "the pleasant, shy manner of a mouse." White himself was chronically shy, at times almost debilitatingly so. When he was first put on the *New Yorker* payroll as a staff writer he insisted on doing all his work from home, eventually agreeing to come in to the office on Thursdays only.

According to Thurber, when visitors came to call hoping to meet the man behind the essays, the humor, and the wonderful children's books, he would duck out the window, climb down the fire escape, and slip away to a nearby Schrafft's lunch counter to sit things out until the coast was clear.

He routinely skipped weddings and graduations, parties and meetings, dedication and book awards. When he was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963, he declined the invitation to go receive the award in person from the president, leaving it to his state senator, Edmund Muskie, to receive the prize for him.

Seven years after the publication of *Stuart Little* White wrote a second children's book, this one about an unlikely friendship between a pig and a spider that ended up saving the pig's life.

In my [issue on Madeleine L'Engle](#) last summer, I mentioned a 2012 survey of *School Library Journal* readers, which placed *A Wrinkle in Time* as second best children's novel ever written. #1 on that list was *Charlotte's Web*.

White himself says the idea for *Charlotte's Web* came to him when he came upon a spider spinning an egg sac on his and Katharine's farm in Maine — but another source suggests a second strand of inspiration.

A few years prior to *Charlotte's Web* White had penned an essay for *The Atlantic* entitled "The Death of a Pig," in which he described how he bought the pig with the intention of fattening it for slaughter, and instead ended up nursing it through a fatal illness and finally burying it on the farm.

It's worth pointing out the means by which Charlotte the spider saves Wilbur's life: through her pitch-perfect choice of which words to spin in her web. Charlotte knew how to wield her creator's superpower.

As *New Yorker* editor William Shawn wrote of White in his obituary:

His literary style was as pure as any in our language. It was singular, colloquial, clear, unforced, thoroughly American and utterly beautiful. Because of his quiet influence, several generations of this country's writers write better than they might have done. He never wrote a mean or careless sentence. He was impervious to literary, intellectual and political fashion. He was ageless, and his writing was timeless.

He was, Shawn added, "the most companionable of writers."

Though he might duck out of windows and hazard fire escapes to avoid the physical company of others, through the written word he made friends with millions.

Here is what Elaine Engst, Cornell library archivist and keeper of White's papers, wrote about the thousands of letters in her archives from White's correspondence:

People felt they knew [him]. They feel a very personal connection. He's somebody you would like to have known, and that comes through.

In 1970 he published his third and final children's book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, a story about a swan named Louis who is born mute but learns to read and write so that he might woo the lady swan with whom he has fallen in love.

At the novel's conclusion:

"As Louis relaxed and prepared for sleep, all his thoughts were of how lucky he was to inhabit such a beautiful earth ... and how pleasant it was to look forward to another night of sleep and another day tomorrow, and the fresh morning, and the light that returns with the day."

There again is the soul of Andy White, peeking through and reaching out to us through those beautiful sentences. In her foreword to *Charlotte's Web*, Newbery-winning children's author Kate DiCamillo quotes White as saying:

"All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world."

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